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Burial and Gender in Late- and Sub-Roman Britain

by David Petts

Introduction

In this paper I hope to explore the relationship between religious belief and religious practice, by investigating the way in which burial practice was used by Christian communities in Late Roman and Early Medieval Britain. I hope particularly to focus on the way in which one aspect of identity, gender, was articulated, and how this relates more to social structures than to specific belief systems.

Archaeologists have often fought shy of confronting the issues of the influence of religion on burial practice in anything but the most simple sense. Most approaches dealing with the effect of the conversion to Christianity on mortuary behaviour have tended to construct a set of diagnostic practices which relate unproblematically to Christian practice (Green 1977; Watts 1991), invoking what Binford would call a 'rationalist-idealist' approach (Binford 1972). Such approaches tend to be characterized by a normative standpoint, generalizing about the funerary rituals and ignoring the nature of mortuary variability. This is because such approaches fail to consider the manner in which mortuary rites are used as an arena for creating and maintaining a range of social identities, for both the living and the dead.

In any society individuals will assume many different social identities, operating across a range of social dimensions, such as status, rank, gender and religious affiliation. These are bundled together to create a social persona (Pader 1982:15–17). In certain contexts, such as funerals, some of these identities are mobilized, and made materially explicit. Indeed this very process of vocalizing identities helps naturalize them, and at a time of rupture in the social structure, helps create an image of continuity. As well as revealing some identities, others are actively suppressed, and thus funerary rites will only give us a partial view of that individual's social being. It is this very partiality in the mortuary record that is informative to the archaeologist. By an examination of which aspects of the individuals social persona are emphasized or suppressed it is possible to build a wider picture of the methods through which identity was manipulated in certain contexts.

By exploring the way in which one specific aspect of identity, gender, is manipulated in burial by two different burial rites which both have the same ostensible religious background, I hope to show that the way in which social identity is constructed at death is not related unproblematically to religious belief but to the way in which this religious belief is played out in day-to-day life. It is important to understand religion as operating at two separate yet related levels: religious belief and religious practice. Whilst these are connected the relationship is complex. A normative set of religious beliefs – orthodoxy – may not have a direct relationship with a normative set of practices – orthopraxy. Equally, the same set of ritual practices may be used by a number of differing belief systems, or with variations that are not detectable at the gross level of material culture. For example, currently there are no archaeologically diagnostic ways of distinguishing Pelagianism or Donatism from the more orthodox Christian churches. However, it will be shown, that in this period it is possible to distinguish different burial practices in late and sub-Roman Britain, despite the fact that the areas share a religious orthodoxy. The variation in religious practice is not a direct reflection of religious belief, but of the articulation of these beliefs with varying social structures.

The relationship between belief and practice is however not arbitrary. Inevitably some aspects of ritual behaviour will have referents in the prevailing belief system. In some cases shifts in belief may cause changes in ritual behaviour, but this relationship is not determinant. The articulation between belief and practice is recursive. In the same way that belief *may* affect ritual practice, so may ritual practices affect belief. Ritual is often used to explicate aspects of belief, and may function as a material demonstration of metaphysical concepts. The repetitive nature of ritual means that it is open to constant reinterpretation, which means that it may lead to shifts in belief systems. Such a process has been recognized in early medieval Germanic Christianity (Russell 1994:209–14). Early missionaries allowed the continuance of certain practices in German society, as part of a policy of accommodation aimed at permitting the quick acceptance of Christianity. However, this policy led to a reciprocal ‘Germanization’ of Christianity, which continued to influence patterns of Western European religious belief, well into the second millennium AD.

This is not the place for a detailed consideration of the evidence for Christianity in late and sub-Roman Britain. Certainly there are a wide number of portable objects with Chi-Rho symbols, as well as mosaics, that appear to be Christian in design (Mawer 1995; Thomas 1981; Watts 1991). Until the fifth century there was no distinctive Christian church architecture (Krautheimer 1965:14–15). This means it is hard to prove, conclusively, that any of the structures which have been called ‘churches’ in the past, such as the house-church at Lullingstone (Meates 1987), the structure in Butt Road cemetery, Colchester (Crummy, Crummy and Crossan 1993) or the Silchester church (Frere 1975), are indeed churches. It would, however, seem very unlikely that Britannia was the only diocese in the Roman Empire

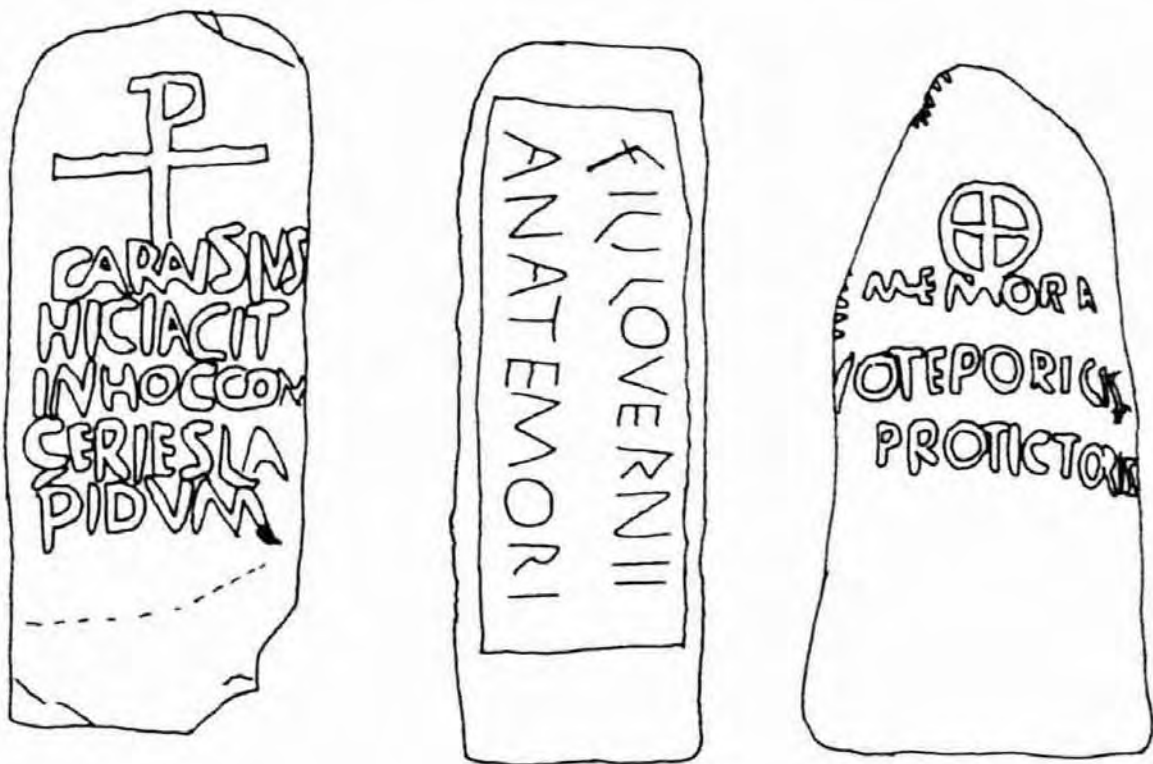


Figure 1. Three examples of Class 1 Inscribed Christian Tombstones from Wales (Nash-Williams 1950, nos. 101, 89, 138)

without such buildings. There are also historical records for British bishops attending Church meetings on the continent – Victricius, Bishop of Rouen paid a visit to Britain in AD397 (Thomas 1981:35–60).

In the sub-Roman period there is also strong evidence for Christianity. Gildas, writing in the first third of the fifth century makes it clear that whatever the short-comings of the British kings whom he excoriates in the *De Excidio*, apostasy is not one of them. He also mentions monks and two martyrs shrines: St Albans and SS Julian and Aaron, the latter probably at Caerleon. A number of the inscribed sub-Roman grave-stones from the west and north of the Diocese of Britannia contain overtly Christian messages (figure 1) (e.g. Nash-Williams 1950; Okasha 1993). There is also evidence for sub-Roman churches, most clearly at St Paul-in-the-Bail,

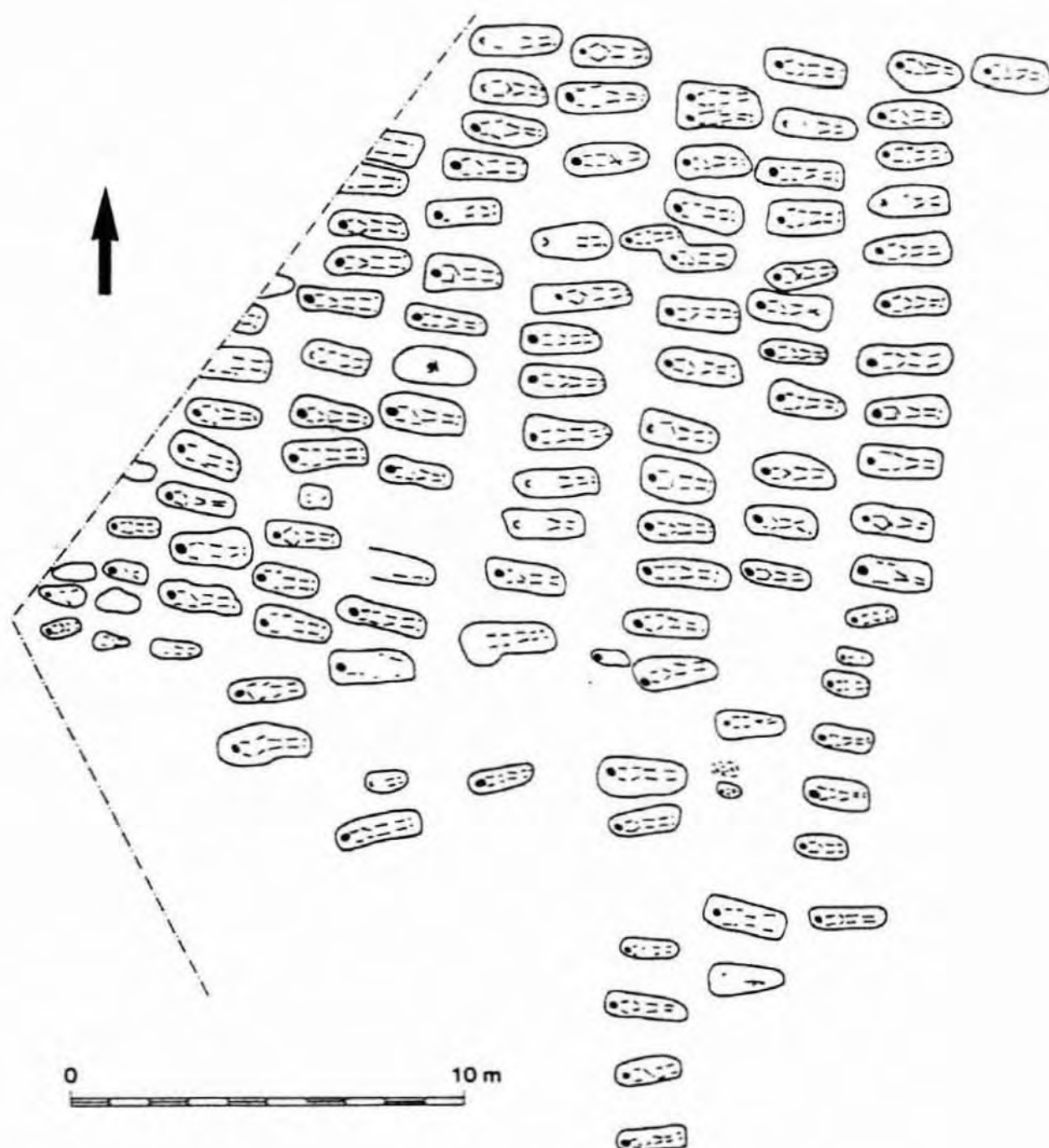


Figure 2. Late Roman inhumation cemetery at Ashton

Lincoln, where a number of inhumations with C¹⁴ dates in the fifth century are related to an incredibly church-like structure in the forum (Jones 1994). The presence of St Germanus in Verulamium in the mid-fifth century, fighting Pelagianism, makes it very difficult to argue that Christianity died out in Britain in the early fifth century and was reintroduced from Gaul to Wales and Ireland in the later fifth century.

I would not wish to argue that Christianity was the dominant religion in Britain until the later fifth century at least, but it is important not to downplay the role of Christianity in mediating the transition from late to sub-Roman Britain.

Christian Burial Practice in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain

Broadly speaking there are two different burial rites that can be related to Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. I have called these the 'Central English rite' and the 'Western rite'.

The 'Central Rite' is that most commonly associated with Christian burial in Late Antiquity: west-east orientation and virtually findless burials in often highly organized cemeteries. This can be seen in late Roman Britain at Ashton (figure 2)(Frere 1984:300, 1985:288), Bletsoe (Dawson 1994) and to a lesser extent Poundbury (Farwell and Molleson 1993). The same burial rite continues, completely unchanged, into the sub-Roman period in the Romanized area of Britain: sites such as Queenford Farm and Cannington are the best examples (Chambers 1987; Rahtz 1977). This rite seems to have developed from the mid/late fourth century onwards and continued throughout the early Medieval period ultimately replacing the Anglo-Saxon tradition of accompanied inhumations in the seventh century.

This rite has several important characteristics. Firstly there is an almost complete lack of grave goods. When they do occur (in less than 5% of graves) the most common artefact is a knife. These are found with both men and women, and unlike Saxon burials there appears to be no relationship between grave length and gender (Härke 1989). The remaining small group of grave goods includes very occasional coins and dress ornaments (these include combs found under the head, suggesting that they were worn). Essentially the use of grave goods to signify any gender role is minimal, occurring in a tiny proportion of graves.

It is not known how the laying out of the body was performed. However, it seems likely that it was during this stage that whatever goods were taken to the grave were added, rather than during the inhumation itself. Bodies were often placed in coffins and the goods found in positions suggesting that they were being worn. The placement of the body would have hidden the grave goods from the eyes of the participants. Overall, this contrasts with Saxon and Pagan Roman burials where the laying out of the body with grave goods often appears to have been an integral part of the act of inhumation.

The organization of graves within these cemeteries also seems to play down gendered identity. There is a lack of focal graves and clustered grave groups, and there is no indication of any differentiation in grave markers. This can be seen clearly at Poundbury where Theya Molleson's analysis of the distribution of non-metric traits appears to show a decline in the clustering of related individuals, suggesting a breakdown in burial of kinship groups (Molleson 1993:44).

Broadly speaking it can be seen that the identity and gender of the individual is not emphasized in this burial rite. However, this is not to deny that there was no differentiation in gender at all. As noted earlier, there was slight differentiation in grave goods between the sexes and there may have been slight differences in the funerary liturgy. The important aspect of these is that the points in the funerary ritual when gender was marked out were momentary, and in the case of grave goods possibly even covert. There was no permanent marker of the individuals

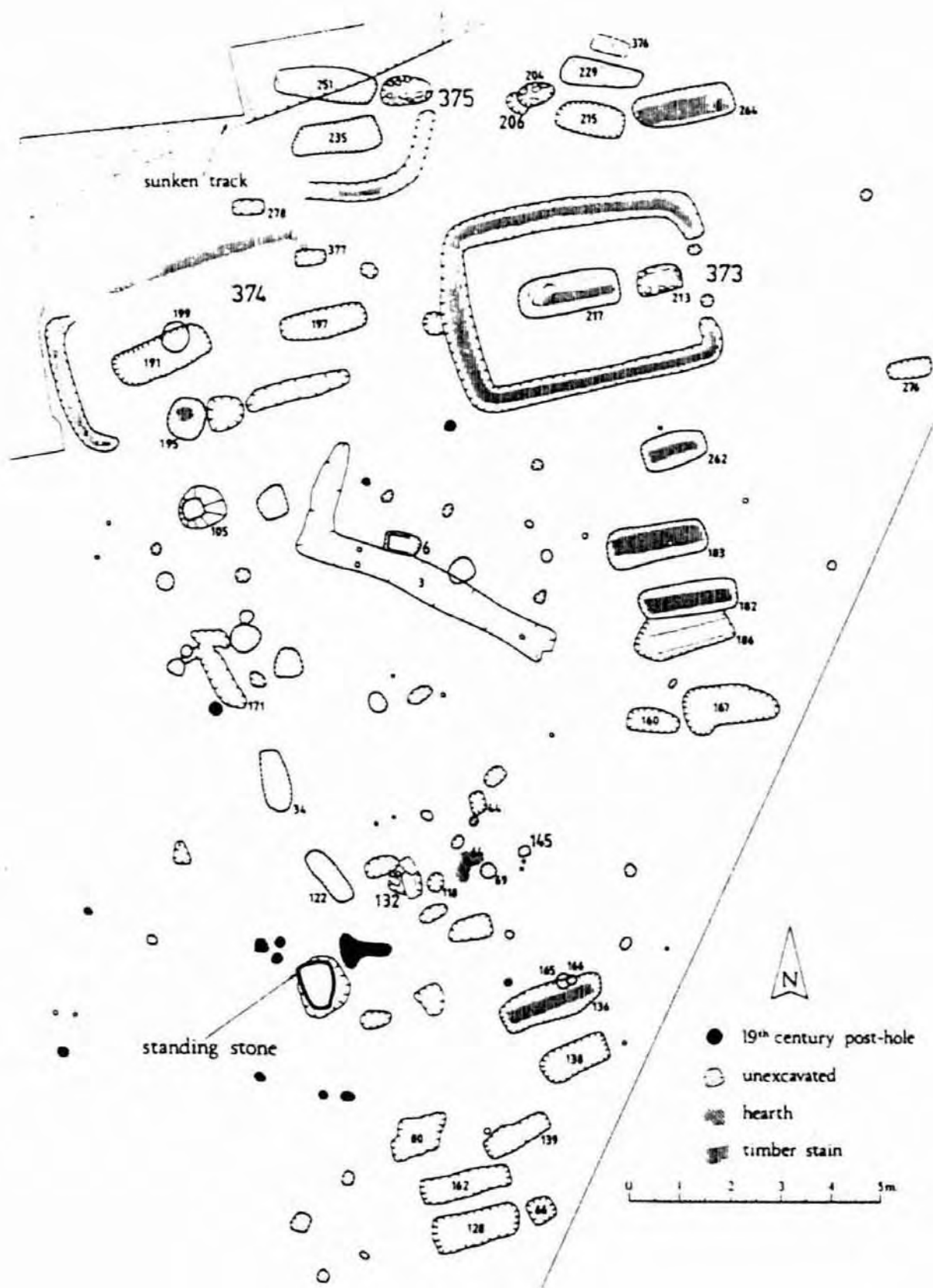


Figure 3. Plas Gogerddan

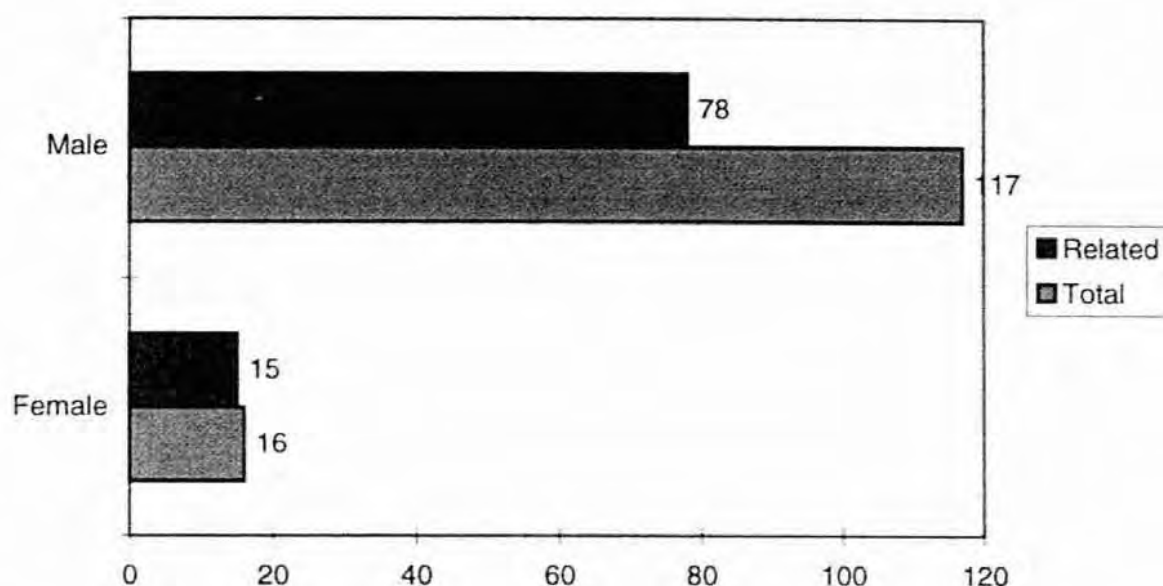


Figure 4. Early Christian gravestones

gender after the act of inhumation itself. Noticeably there is a complete lack of grave-stones from this period though the fourth century is a major period of epigraphic decline across the Empire, in both Pagan and Christian burials (Meyer 1990:95).

This is in complete contrast to the burial rite found in the west of the Diocese of Britannia, in Cornwall and Wales. Although there is a tendency for the graves to be oriented west-east and without finds, the physical organization of the cemetery is in complete contrast. Gone are the serried ranks of anonymous burials, instead there are focal graves and clustering, as at such sites as Plas Gogerddan (figure 3) (Murphy 1992). Graves are also marked out in other ways, through the use of cairns and grave-stones. Some high status graves are also isolated, separated from other burials. A good example is that of the Irish women Cunaide at Carnsew whose grave was marked by a cairn and an Early Christian inscribed monument (Thomas 1994:191–2).

The Carnsew example is very rare as it marks out the grave of a women. The focal graves tend to be almost exclusively male, where it is possible to biologically sex the bones. This pattern is also represented on the gravestones. When compared with Roman grave-stones on which women are frequently recorded, both as the deceased and as the commemorator, there are far fewer women (figure 4). The difference in the recording of male and female grave commemoration is also found in how men and women are defined. Only around 66% of men are recorded as being related to another individual, with a significant minority being defined in terms of a occupation, such as doctor or priest. In many cases, the name alone is recorded, without any further roles being defined. This contrasts with the graves of women where the majority are defined in terms of relationships with men: especially as the wife of named individuals. Very occasionally patrilineal kinship is recorded; this difference perhaps being between married and single women. Unlike the 'Central rite', there is a much greater emphasis on the gender of the buried in the 'Western rite', and this identity is particularly explored through an emphasis on patrilineal descent for men, and usually through marriage for women.

The emphasis on family grouping also appears to be emphasized through the clustering

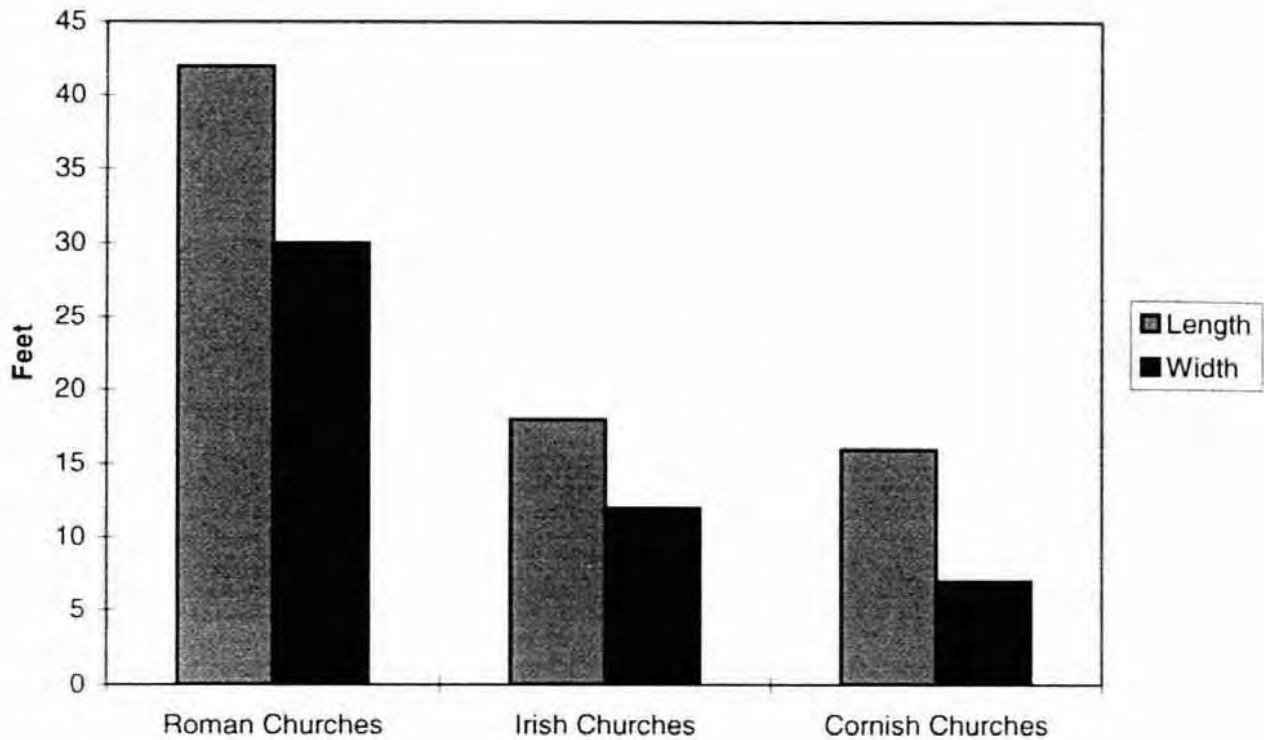


Figure 5. Comparison of church sizes

around focal graves. Whereas individual identity, especially gender, was suppressed and transitory in the 'Central rite', in the 'Western rite' identity and gender is spatialized and monumentalized through a material emphasis on genealogy. Most members of the burial community are identified through an explicit or implicit linkage with a male lineage. The cemetery itself is gendered. The space however is not only gendered in terms of the burial. Early Welsh law codes suggest that cemeteries were used both as places of burial and as the site of judicial procedures. These procedures again emphasized the importance of male identity. In both Wales and Ireland women had limited legal competency and were often unable to participate in legal proceedings (Davies 1982:79; Ó Cróinín 1995:129–130; Price 1993:42). Oaths were sometimes sworn, by men, on the graves of both saints and ancestors (Jenkins 1990:70). Again the male legal autonomy is emphasized and articulated within the cemetery; women are only able to operate in this gendered space through the agency of men.

The obvious question is, why do two such different burial rites exist in two Christian societies? I feel that it relates to the way in which Christianity was institutionalized within these two communities. It is not an issue of religious belief but of religious practice.

It is clear that Roman Christianity was essentially episcopal in structure, and for the Western Empire this meant that it was urban in focus. The notion of the *chorepiscopi*, or rural bishop was only known in the Roman East (Jones 1964:877–9). Bishops are attested historically from Britain: bishops from York, London and possibly Lincoln attended the Council of Arles in 314, and a number of other sites are sure to have been episcopal seats, such as London, Carlisle, St Albans and Cirencester. In the sub-Roman period the best evidence for Christianity is urban: such as the churches of St-Paul-in-the-Bail at Lincoln (Jones 1994), St Mary-de-Lode, Gloucester (Bryant 1980), and historically at St Albans. The presence of the large Christian cemetery at Queensford Mill, Dorchester along with possible continuity of use on the site of Dorchester Abbey suggest that this too was also an episcopal site.

But there is a need to move beyond a demonstration of the urban episcopal nature of Roman and sub-Roman Christianity. It is important to look at the way in which their religious belief was practiced. A brief look at the nature of Roman and British churches shows strong parallels with continental examples. In terms of use of space these churches have been labelled *congregational* (Thomas 1981:156–8), and it is clear from continental historical evidence that these churches were designed for community worship (figure 5). They acted as a focus for the Christian occupation of the *civitas*, and certainly in late Antiquity there was a tendency for the episcopate to take on the secular administration of urban centres (Harries 1992). Communities came to be defined in terms of church rather than in terms of city, a fundamental shift in self-identity. The Christian church was able to completely recreate the way in which urban communities defined themselves.

This emphasis on the importance of the Christian identity was played out through burial practice. It is in the arena of death and burial that the relationship between the family and the wider Christian community was negotiated. In the fourth century, despite attempts by the Church to create a category of 'special dead', usually the early Christian martyrs, there was no attempt by the church to interfere with private burial rites. Instead the grave-yard was the locus of inter-élite competition. In the words of Peter Brown, "The strong sense of community preserved by Christian ritual, was only so much icing on the top of a rich and increasingly crumbly cake of well-to-do Christian families" (Brown 1981:31–2). Increasingly the church became concerned about the atomizing tendency of the 'privatization' of religious practice by high-status families: a privatization of practice which threatened the fragile veil of Christian unity. The church reacted to this by a war on these modes of élite competition: funerary feasting, architectural elaboration etc. Despite two centuries of Christian acceptance, these rituals were not completely banned, but their use was limited by the Church to the graves of 'saints'. In the latter half of the fourth century there was an attempt by the episcopate, including the likes of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine in Hippo to exert control over burial rites (Brown 1981). The concept of the kinship of the church was renegotiated: the cult of the saints acted as a new focus for religious practice. Rather than a system of relationships and clientships focused on secular families, the Church restructured the Christian community, placing the saint and the bishop as the focus for clientage and intercessions.

In the sub-Roman period, Christianity came to be the fundamental structuring principal in community identity. This was undoubtedly encouraged by the presence of incoming Saxon social groups. It is not surprising that in the face of a hostile Pagan element in society there was an increasing emphasis on Christianity. It is noticeable that some of the most obvious British enclaves in Saxon Britain appear to have been centres for Christian worship: St Albans, mentioned by Germanus and Bede appears to have been both an important Christian shrine and a centre for an post-Roman urban (-ish) Christian élite, and it has been argued that it was the centre for a British polity (Dark 1994:86–89). Lincoln was the centre of the territory of Lindsay, known for resisting Saxon incursion, and had as its sub-Roman focus, the church at St-Paul-in-the Bail (Jones 1994). Dorchester-on-Thames was also, arguably, a similar enclave: there is the large sub-Roman cemetery at Queensford Mill (Chambers 1987), with fifth century occupation within the town (Frere 1962), and it is arguable that there was continuity of Christian worship on the site of the Abbey Church (Dogget 1986). Certainly Dorchester-on-Thames was the site of one of the earliest Saxon dioceses, under St Birinius. I would suggest that in sub-Roman Britain cultural identity was defined as much in terms of religious practice, as on ethnic terms. Gildas also suggests that in the fifth century that church leaders were centered in towns (*De Excidio* 24:3).

Thus in Roman Britain and central sub-Roman Britain an episcopally organized church,

assumed the place of civic authority and may have attempted to assert itself against local élite kinship groups. It is in this context that the way in which gender was treated in burial must be understood. The structuring principles of a burial rite that may emphasize kinship and gender are replaced by a levelling ideology in which all are equal in the eyes of God. But this ideology of equality was developed in specific social contexts. The control of community ritual practice by the episcopate can therefore be seen as an attempt to assert the power of the Church over other competing power bases, especially local élites. The advent of an increasingly hostile and expansionist Pagan Saxon area also contributed to the emphasis on a unified Christian identity, rather than an individualizing ideology.

This situation is, however, very different to the practice of Christianity played out in the Celtic West. Whilst Roman Christianity was primarily episcopal, the Church in the West had a monastic structure. Any Christian church has a need for bishops but in the unurbanized Celtic West, bishops operated within a network of mainly rural and monastic churches rather than through urban power-bases (Sharpe 1984:241). Although the bishops had certain specific sacramental powers, they were often equalled or indeed subordinate to the more practical power of the abbots. The failure of the episcopal church to develop roots is undoubtedly related to the lack of an urban infrastructure.

It is clear that religious practice in these monasteries was organized in a fundamentally different way to urban episcopacies. The most obvious difference is the lack of communal worship in the early Celtic Church. Although mass was regularly said in churches, the Western churches, unlike the Central episcopal churches are much smaller and not suited for communal worship (figure 5). It is unclear whether these masses were attended by the lay population, though in the Irish Life of St Colman a man who regularly received the sacrament was seen as unusual (Bitel 1990), and it is also clear that in Wales, communion was not taken regularly by the laity (Davies 1982:185). This lack of communal worship extends into burial rites. References to the funeral of Columba in Andomnán's *Life of Columba* showed how the congregation for the burial service was small, and many who wished to attend were actively excluded (Andomnán). Irish law-codes make it clear that a monastery only owed pastoral duties to its immediate lay clients (Bitel 1990).

Another important element in Western monasteries was the way in which monastic organization paralleled secular organizational structures. In the small Irish kingdoms, in the same way as there was a hierarchy of kings, there was a parallel hierarchy of bishops. Within the monastery it can be seen that they were often organized in the same way as kinships. In Irish texts the head of a church was known as a *princeps* (note the secular term) and it was clear that a monk may be married with children. This may be paralleled in the Welsh church, where the existence of the *clas*, a hereditary monastic body, although best known in the ninth and tenth centuries may well have its origin much earlier. The Irish word *tuath* was used to describe the people of kingdom, and also the people of a church (NB: not the Christian church in general, but of a specific foundation), and the bishop had the same status as the head of a *tuath*. Irish monasteries were also able to contract monastic tenants, *mannaig*, in a contractual relationship that was modelled on secular clientship (Bitel 1990:115–116). They were described as *fine erlume*, belonging to the kin-group of the patron saint of the monastery. *Mannaig* were subject to the monastery, and paid food renders to the church. According to the *Córus Béscnai*, the church was in turn obliged to offer four clerical obligations to clients: baptism, communion, mass and funeral rites (Bitel 1990:126). Religious rituals were essentially exclusive, and mainly obtainable through client relationships. Allegiance to a particular church was often passed by descent and thus the fortune of a church depended on the fortune of its clients and supporters.

This support could be bought, by allowing certain kin groups privileged access to rituals.

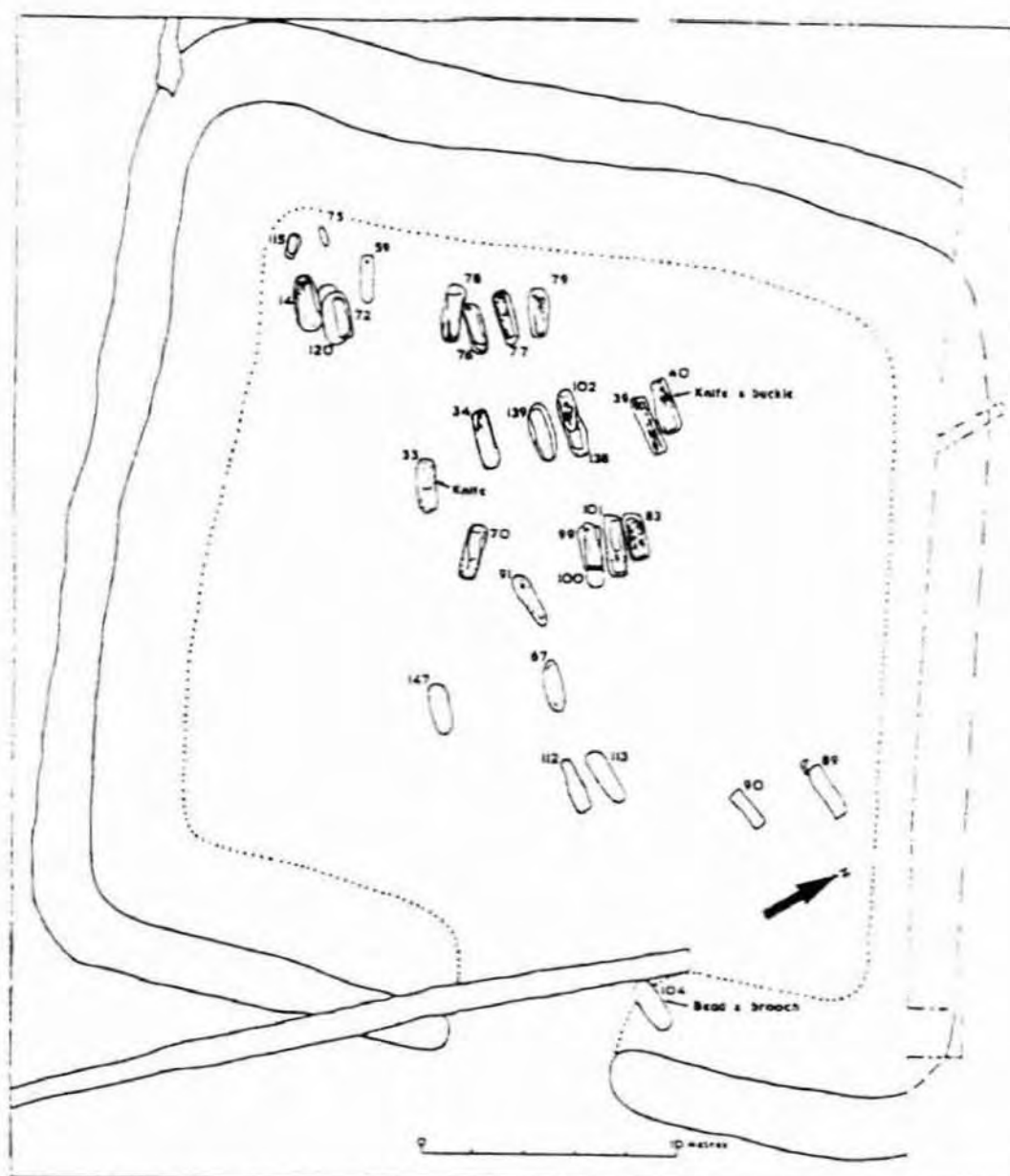


Figure 6. Bromfield, Shropshire

The rite of Christian burial was not something that was available to all, and it is clear that in the early Medieval period the church did not have the monopoly over burial. In the first stage of conversion it is apparent from the *Vita S. Patrici* that Pagans and Christians were often buried alongside each other (O'Brien 1992:135). Even into the seventh century it is clear that many cemetery sites had their origin in Pagan burial sites, and fail to show any indication of Christian activity.

To summarize, in the Celtic West, the church was structured in such a way as to act parallel to the pre-existing kinships rather than replacing them. The Christian community was atomized and operated alongside other kinship groups, rather than trying to replace them. In return for food-renders and labour the church provided a limited quantity of pastoral care. Indeed the continuing success of a particular monastery was concomitant to the success of the kinship groups which supported it, rather than competition against them. In such a context, burial

continued to be structured on kinship terms: focal graves were of important members of the kinship, be it secular or monastic. Christian burial was not used to bring together the wider Christian community: it was instead used as a means of marking out privileged kingroups. This emphasis on kingroups, led to an emphasis on the role of women in maintaining and channelling lineages: thus there was still an emphasis on defining women in terms of genealogy.

From the seventh to eighth centuries these burial patterns can both be seen to break down. In the West, the church began to increase control over burial rites. This can be seen in the growth of 'developed cemeteries' (Thomas 1971:51), where a cemetery was first enclosed and then given a church. Many older cemeteries, not controlled by the Church, failed to develop, and fell out of use. At this time the internal organization of grave-yards changed, focal graves were limited to structures within the church building itself and were strictly controlled by the church community. Instead, as in the earlier Roman Church, there was an increase in the tendency to demonstrate its unified nature: burials became organized in simple rows, tomb-stones ceased and there was a lack of mounds and cairns. Rather than emphasizing status through burial it was expressed in other ways, such as donating treasure to the church, architectural elaboration of the church structure or the erection of stone crosses (Price 1992). There seems to have been a tendency to mark many of the Early Christian stones with cross-symbols, and this may be seen as an attempt to claim as their own, graves that were not obviously Christian. This can be seen in the context of the monastic church increasing and asserting its secular power. At this point the local élite families began to be seen by the Church as competitors rather than supporters.

This contrasts with the situation in the areas with a more traditional episcopal structure. Here the organized cemeteries may begin to show a breakdown in community identities: the development of focal graves and clustering graves may possibly represent family/kinship groups. This can be seen clearly at the late sixth century cemetery at Ulwell near Swanage in Dorset, where clusters of graves are clearly visible (Cox 1988). This situation is paralleled at the mid/late sixth century at Bromfield in Shropshire (Stanford 1995) (figure 6).

It can be seen that despite a common religious belief: *orthodoxy*, there is a lack of common ritual behaviour, *orthopraxy*. Whilst these two levels of religious behaviour are not completely independent, there is no primary determinant relationship between the two. In the field of gender, in the late/sub-Roman Christian burial, it is not theological niceties that influenced the way in which women were defined in death, but the pragmatics of power relationships. In both the Celtic West and in the Later Roman Empire the Church only sought to control mortuary behaviour when the issue of kinship, a form of social structure that placed women in a nodal, though not necessarily controlling, position began to threaten the growing temporal power of the Church.

Before I finish it is important to emphasize that in this paper I have not been discussing one overall normative female identity, in which women are condemned to act merely as pawns within the web of kinship relationships. All individuals have a wide number of social roles, and it is only because the Church came to perceive certain social structures as a threat that the kinship dimension of female identity became part of the field of discourse. In burial rites more than one identity may be signalled: the occasional and possibly covert use of grave goods suggests that competing social identities may have been explored, and Peter Brown has suggested that cemetery areas in late Antiquity were an area of 'low gravity' for women where there was less male control and scrutiny (Brown 1981:41–44).

Inevitably due to the short space available, and the partiality of the data, I have been dealing with two broad abstractions, contrasting the Celtic 'Western rite' with the Roman 'Central rite'. There are obvious dangers in using this level of generalization, and it is clear that the concept of the 'Celtic Church' is a modern concept hiding a wide variety of different practices (Davies

1992). It is hoped in further work to explore the regional variations within Cornwall, Wales and Ireland, and to place them in their social context. Finally, in any attempt to examine burial behaviour we must remember that it is religious practice not religious belief that structure mortuary behaviour, and that even allowing for this, the grave and the cemetery are debatable areas, where many different identities compete for recognition.

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